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ABSTRACT

Based on the notion that visual decisions play an important role in what children recognize and interpret in books and that teachers have a special responsibility to help students become visually literate, this article draws parallels between visual and verbal concepts and suggests some activities for teaching "picture reading" skills in the classroom. A brief overview of the basic concepts of visual literacy emphasizes the interconnectedness of verbal and visual language, noting that both (1) have a surface and a deep structure, (2) rely on an innate grammar that provides rules for dealing with an otherwise chaotic universe of communication, (3) involve interaction between the picture and the viewer, and (4) interact when an individual encounters a picture in context with print. These parallels are drawn to help teachers understand that many of the same techniques of verbal language analysis are useful for visual analysis. Thus, the eight activities described offer teachers and students unique opportunities to build language competence while automatically extending verbal language competence. (JD)

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VISUAL LITERACY AND READING: LET'S TAKE A CLOSER LOOK

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VISUAL LITERACY AND READING:
LET'S TAKE A CLOSER LOOK

SUMMARY: As long as visual decisions play an important role in what children recognize and interpret in books, teachers have a special responsibility to help students become visually literate. This article draws parallels between visual and verbal concepts and suggests some activities for teaching "picture reading" skills in the classroom.

Oh, Oh.
See Dick.
Oh, see Dick.
Sally.
Look, Sally.
Look, look.
See Jane.

These words from a 1951 Scott Foresman reader (Gray, Artley, and Arbuthnot, pp. 8-10) may have been lacking in natural language, but those who did "look" and "see" were often enchanted by the colorful pictures of Dick, Jane, and Sally cavorting about with Spot and Puff. Today an even richer variety of illustrations saturate the pages of children's books, helping to contribute to the reader's understanding of characters, settings, objects and actions.

While it is apparent that pictures form a dramatic link between known and unknown, between symbols of experience and symbols of sound, early literacy concerns were only superficially directed to visual messages beyond the print found in children's readers. Illustrations were largely viewed as ways to motivate reluctant readers and stimulate insentient imaginations.

Not until the mid-1960's did a new and broader concept of literacy arise. Although television alone dramatically altered the predominance of aural modes in mass communication, other new technologies of printing and reproduction created a flood of visual messages for children through books, periodicals, posters, product packagings, and even via T-shirts and lunch pails. Educators can no longer ignore the need to help students in the classroom cope with the world as it exists outside the classroom, a world in need of adept readers of both verbal and visual messages.

Yet, teachers often assume that children will naturally acquire the skills to view illustrations meaningfully. That is, as long as children look, they will see; and as long as they see, they will surely understand what they see.

But, just as specific skills are needed to read and write printed messages, so specific skills are paramount to "reading" and "writing" visual ones. Visual literacy, therefore, can be defined as the learned ability to accurately comprehend and create visual messages. While this definition encompasses total media competency, this author will deal only with the comprehension aspect of non-projected visuals, namely pictures, such as those found in basal readers, content texts and children's literature.

An exploration of some basic concepts of visual literacy presupposes an understanding of the interconnectedness of verbal and visual language. First, it can be argued that both verbal and visual statements have a surface structure and a deep structure. Both are visual representations of underlying ideas (Fransecky and Debes, 1972). Secondly, like verbal statements, visual statements rely on an

innate grammar which provides us with rules for dealing with an otherwise chaotic universe of communications. This informal rule system which Feldman (1976) calls an "innate grammar of images" (p. 196) resembles the syntax of verbal language:

> Today, words do not resemble the ideas or objects they stand for. We read them, first by recognizing them as symbols of real ideas or things; second by noting their arrangement in space, that is, their sequential position; and third by interpreting the relationship between the symbolic meanings of the words and their sequential or syntactic meanings based on their positions in a word string or sentence. Now reading images entails fundamentally the same operation: we have to attend to visual signs. That is, if our eyes are open we are obliged to notice lines, shapes, colors, textures, and light intensities. Then we have to recognize these as signs combined into forms; we notice how they are arranged in space (syntactic analysis). Finally we read a total image by examining the relations between its form-symbols and their spatial organization (interpretation or comprehension) (p. 197).

The result of visual communication, then, is the transmission of signals which evoke meaning. A third parallel between verbal and visual language is drawn when we understand that gaining meaning involves an interaction between the picture and the viewer. Visual signals (pictures) can influence perception of reality just as reality can influence perception of visual signals (Bagby, 1957). In other words, viewers bring their background of knowledge to bear on what they view just as readers apply their background of knowledge to what they read.

Lastly, when pictures occur in context with print, it is often difficult to ascertain whether the visual cues give context for interpreting the verbal message, or the verbal message gives context for interpreting the visual message. A study on the effect of different kinds of pictures on comprehension (Rice, Doan, and Brown,

1981) reveals that comprehension is affected by both as long as both are present. Consequently, teaching students to make use of relevant information from the print in most texts involves teaching students about some aspects of visuals.

Teaching visual literacy skills is not difficult when we consider that many of the same techniques of verbal language analysis are useful for visual analysis. The following eight activities are by no means an exhaustive listing of visual literacy possibilities. They arise from this author's experiences teaching primary- and intermediate-age children and have been found effective in improving students' knowledge about pictures.

Along with the activities listed, parallels are drawn between verbal and visual concepts to help teachers understand that many of the same techniques of verbal language analysis are useful for visual analysis. And, because visuals offer teachers and students unique opportunities to share language experiences, rich meaning-centered interactions are important as activities are carried out. In this way, building visual language competence automatically extends verbal language competence as well.

VERBAL CONCEPT	VISUAL CONCEPT	ACTIVITIES
1. Verbal language can differ in concreteness of expression. Both literal and figurative language affect reader comprehension.	Although visuals can differ in aspects such as size, composition and colour, a difference in degree of realism has a more profound effect. Either too much or too little realism may affect learning.	As children encounter pictures in texts, help them understand that illustrations can range from realistic (photographs) to unrealistic (line drawings, abstract paintings, and cartoons) Discuss the likenesses, differences, and uses of types of realism. Collect and rate pictures on a realism scale of 1-5 with 1 being unrealistic and 5 being highly realistic.
2. Decoding the words in a written message does not guarantee an understanding of the literal or inferred message, or that the message can be related to the reader's own experience.	Seeing a picture does not guarantee its interpretation. Pictures can be interpreted on a literal level by identifying and analyzing elements, and on an inferential level by integrating the parts into a whole and relating the whole to experience.	Provide practice in "reading" pictures at different levels. Ask questions to make sure children can: identify objects, people, settings and actions; tell how the details are related; make comparisons to their own experiences; draw conclusions; predict what happened before or after. Have students create a new story or picture based on the original.
3. Stories are written from different points of view. First person offers the reader a close personal perspective. In third person, the writer usually takes a broader view of the action.	Illustrations can show closer, more detailed views of objects, people, settings and actions, or these elements can appear more distant.	Help students find examples of close-up illustrations and those from a more distant perspective. Students can pretend to be the painter or photographer and estimate or demonstrate how far they were from the subject, or from what angle they worked (above, below, or on the same

		level).
4. Beginning readers differ from more experienced readers in the tasks they are able to perform and the facility with which they can perform them.	Younger viewers may not easily see or interpret ideas and relationships represented by abstract symbols or complex pictures.	Give students practice viewing and interpreting some of the more common international picture signs such as those encountered on highways, on electronic equipment, and throughout the community at restaurants, recreational areas, etc. Make a class collection of such symbols.
5. Understanding conventions of written English (punctuation) and typographic features (italics, bold type) are important for the comprehension of text material.	In order to understand what they see, children may need help interpreting artistic conventions such as speed lines, foreshortening, and size differences to connote distance.	Let children experiment with moving closer and farther away from objects and describing how appearances change. Find examples of illustrations where an object appears larger in the foreground and the same object is smaller in the background. Pictures of a neighborhood of houses, trees and cars work well. Let children find similar examples of pictures where a normally small object, such as a ball, appears larger than a normally large object, such as a house, because the ball is in the foreground.
6. The background of knowledge a reader brings to the reading act has a strong influence on the interpretation of what is read.	Cultural and lifestyle differences have a strong influence on the interpretation of pictures. Scenes depicting typical home life or a common historical event may be particularly confusing to a foreign born student.	Provide more varied opportunities for discussion of pictures which depict cultures or lifestyles markedly different from that of students. The illustrations in old readers or foreign language texts are good for helping native born students experience the difficulties of

		interpreting pictures outside of their experiential background.
7. Authors use descriptive and figurative language to add interest and realism to their stories, and to heighten the emotional responses of readers.	Color or lack of color is used in illustrations to add interest and realism, and to heighten viewers' emotional responses.	Before, during or after stories are read, draw students' attention to the colors used in the illustrations. Are they single- or multi-colored? In lighter or darker hues? Only in primary colors? What feelings do the colors evoke? Why do they think these colors were chosen for this particular story?
8. In Western cultures the print in books is read from left to right.	Viewers from Western cultures tend to look first at the upper left-hand quadrant of a picture.	The implication is that many students may not automatically look, for example, in the lower right-hand corner of a picture. If an important element is bejng referred to in this area, students may need to be told more precisely where to look and given time to move their focus to the spot.

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